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Learning cultures and learning styles: myth-understandings about adult (Hong Kong) Chinese learners

PETER KENNEDY
University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR China

The picture that often emerges from the research literature on 'Chinese learners' is a caricature of rote-learning, memorization and passivity. This article takes issue with the stereotype. The paper is in three parts. The first part considers the extent to which Chinese culture may influence Chinese learning styles. Some received opinions are counterpoised with more recent reinterpretations. The paper later examines some of the findings from the literature on effective adult learning. The third part explores the extent to which Hong Kong adult learners adopt learning styles consonant with those outlined in the second section. The results of the survey research, action learning projects and case studies considered suggest that Hong Kong adult learners are receptive to new modes of learning and go on to adopt learning styles quite different from those they deployed in school. The arguments are situated within the literature on adult Chinese second language (L2) learning but have wider resonance and application to Hong Kong adult learners in general.

Chinese culture and Chinese learners

Some received opinions

(Hong Kong) Chinese culture. Biggs and Moore (1993: 24) define culture as 'the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings which is transmitted from one generation to another'. Culture is not just a matter of overt behaviour, it is also the (social) rules, beliefs, attitudes and values that govern how people act and how they define themselves. It is 'the fabrics of meaning with which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions' (Geertz, 1973: 42). Hofstede (1980) developed a framework for measuring cultural differences in 40 countries.[1] He identified three cultural 'layers': the basic norms and values shared by all human beings; the collective beliefs and values shared by particular groups of people; and an individual's unique experience of people and things. The four dimensions of 'cultural difference' Hofstede posited are: individuality/ collectivism, power/distance (relative inequalities of power and wealth), uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. Trompanaars (1993) in his study of 50 countries developed (five) similar measures of cultural orientation. In

Peter Kennedy is Senior Programme Director with the School of Professional and Continuing Education, University of Hong Kong. He is responsible for programmes in the fields of adult education, HRM & training as well as in English and theatre studies. His last four books were concerned with the use of literary texts in second language learning. He is co-editor of *Lifelong Learning in Action: Hong Kong Practitioners' Perspectives* (2002).

Hofstede and Bond (1984) and Hofstede (1980), (Hong Kong) Chinese culture is characterized as low on individualism and high on collectivism; power/distance ratios were amongst the highest of all 40 countries surveyed; weak uncertainty avoidance—the degree of risk tolerance—was identified; (stereo-typical) masculinity was found to be 'medium'.

Trompanaars' (1993) study concluded that in Hong Kong Chinese culture there is a high level of collectivism, a strong sense of belonging to a social group and a preference for working together in groups to solve problems. A study by Redding (1990) of Hong Kong Chinese middle managers also indicated high power/distance relations and an overriding concern with the maintenance of harmonious relationships at work.

Chinese culture and learning. Cortazzi and Jin (1996: 172) remark that although 'Chinese students constitute a major group of the world's learners, roughly 25%, as yet there is very little data-based research into their culture of learning'. What are the cultural roots of 'Chinese' learning? The learning styles adopted by Chinese learners are often attributed to 'Confucian values'. Students' apparent reluctance to express opinions in class is said to be determined by their 'Confucian heritage'. For instance, Murphy (1987: 43) suggests that the reason 'Hong Kong students display an almost unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher ... may be a transfer of the Confucian ethic of filial piety, coupled with an emphasis on strictness of discipline and proper behaviour'. Scollon and Scollon (1995) write about the 'Confucian' teacher–student relationship in contemporary Hong Kong, as do Ho and Crookall (1995: 241), who go on to remark that 'some aspects of Chinese culture appear to be impediments to autonomy'. Nelson (1995: 9) sees aspects of Confucianism 'operationalised in the (L2) learning styles' of Chinese learners.

The Confucian code of social conduct, *Wu Lun*, requires that in the 'five cardinal relationships', respect and obedience must be accorded to the latter by the former in each of these pairs: ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, older and younger friends (Bond 1996). In Hong Kong Chinese families, it is said that children are taught to have respect for age and rank—for parents, elders and ancestors. Proper respect is also to be given to teachers whose wisdom and knowledge is taken for granted and not to be questioned. (Teachers in turn are expected to have a good moral character.) There is strong pressure to conform and act in the interests of the group. Compromise, moderation and the maintenance of harmonious relationships are encouraged, individualism and self-assertion discouraged: 'honour the hierarchy first, your vision of the truth second' (Bond 1992: 83).

The concept of 'face' (*mien-tzu*)—having status in front of others—is important. It is considered selfish and shameful to cause someone to 'lose face' (Bond 1996). Being modest and self-effacing, not 'blowing your own trumpet' is praiseworthy, while wasting other students' class time by expressing independent judgements is egotistical and selfish. Besides, such challenges are disrespectful to teachers and may cause them to lose face (Hwang 1987, Chang and Holt 1994). Teachers should also be moderate in their behaviour too. Hong Kong teachers seldom seek to encourage students with positive appraisals of their performances (Hau 1992). Parents do not usually praise to encourage their children's learning either (Hess,

1992) though children are often publicly chastised for deviant behaviour. (These two studies are cited in Watkins and Biggs 1996: 89). It is frequently contended that such socio-cultural attitudes promote conformity and reinforce passive, compliant roles in class. Students are not encouraged to speak out, to question and to criticize, and are unwilling to commit themselves for fear of being wrong and thus losing face (Tsui 1996). Teaching is largely didactic and text-bound, with little time allowed for discussion: 'for many Chinese students and teachers books are thought of as an embodiment of knowledge, wisdom and truth. Knowledge is 'in' the book and can be taken out and put inside students' heads . . . [whereas] for many foreigners, books are open to interpretation and dispute' (Maley 1983: 101). When learning their first language, Chinese students have to copy out and memorize thousands of written characters. In mainland China and in Hong Kong, the nature of the ideographic script develops children's ability to recognize patterns and memorize by rote. It is sometimes suggested that such learning habits and teaching styles are transferred, subsequently, to other classrooms. The exam culture in mainland China and Hong Kong is also said to influence learning styles. In China, from the 13th century onwards, success in public exams could lead to great wealth and high status (Lee 1996: 25–41). Academic success in Hong Kong still remains the route to a good job. The family's 'investment' in education is not just for the child's personal benefit; within a network of mutual obligations, the debt to the family is as tangible as a bank loan that must be paid off: 'ultimately, accomplishments are on behalf of the family's well-being and reputation . . . [their] social and economic insurance . . . today's child is tomorrow's ancestor' (Pratt 1999: 254). The ancient Civil Service exam tested the ability to memorize classical works; many commentators on the exam system in China and Hong Kong suggest that learning for exams still relies heavily on memorization. Such exams, they argue, promote surface learning—the ability merely to repeat information without a real understanding of meaning or of how the new information relates to previous knowledge. Exams act as a barrier to creative expression, critical thinking and problem-solving in education and, subsequently, in work too.[2] Hong Kong students are usually characterized as hard-working and diligent but lacking in creativity and originality, 'even though Chinese students do better than Western students in mathematics and sciences, they are not known for their creativity and original thinking' (Salili 1996: 100).

Chinese (L2) learning styles.   Learning styles have been defined as the 'characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviours that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment' (Keefe 1979, cited in Melton 1990: 30). Oxford and Anderson (1995: 203)—summarizing a number of major cross-cultural studies of (L2) learning styles—identify six interrelated aspects. In terms of preferred patterns of mental functioning, 'the Chinese learner' is said to prefer classrooms where (grammar) rules are emphasized and learning is inductive whereas a *field independent learner* (Oxford and Anderson 1995: 205) enjoys greater personal autonomy, deductive learning and does not readily accept other people's views before making a judgement. Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) describe Chinese learners as adopting a *concrete-sequential* cognitive style as opposed to an *intuitive-random* one (the latter

type of learner seeks out 'the big picture', a mental model of the L2, while the former prefers to follow the teacher to the letter and to use strategies such as memorization, lists and repetition). Chinese learners are more *reflective* than *impulsive*, that is, they prefer a slow, accurate, systematic approach and are less comfortable with guessing or predicting. They feel the need for rapid and constant correction and have a low level of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. The issue of Chinese learners' *extroversion* or *introversion*—their preference for group work and interactive activities or for working alone—is more complex. It is said that Chinese students seldom work in small groups in class but co-operate readily in groups outside the classroom (Su 1995). In terms of sensory and perceptual tendencies, Rossi-Le (1995) reports that Chinese learners—particularly older students—have a strong visual orientation. Su (1995) found that Chinese students prefer kinaesthetic movement and like to work with tangible objects. (The studies mentioned in this paragraph are cited in Oxford and Anderson 1995.) While these studies of learning-style typologies would only claim to be identifying general tendencies, the obvious drawback of such a broad, inclusive category as 'the Chinese (L2) Learner' is that gender and age differences as well as differences between Hong Kong, PRC and other Chinese learners may be obscured.

Some recent re-interpretations

Confucian confusions.   The 'Confucian values' of collectivism and conformity are often stressed in the research literature on 'the Chinese Learner'. However, as Lee (1996: 34) says, this is only part of the story; Confucius also had much to say about individuality in learning. Education is only meaningful if it leads to the perfection of the self: 'the purpose of learning is to cultivate oneself as an intelligent, creative, independent, autonomous being'. Cheng (2000: 441) concurs, pointing out that the Chinese term 'knowledge' is made up of two characters: 'One is '*xue*' (to learn) and the other is '*wen*' (to ask). This means that the action of enquiring and questioning is central to the quest for knowledge'.

Wrong about rote.   Memorization has never been seen as an end in itself but as a prelude to deeper understanding—mentally 'photocopying' texts, committing them to memory, enabled the 'learner' to savour and reflect on them later, and, finally, to integrate them with his/her prior learning and experience. In any case, memorization *per se* need not be synonymous with surface learning. For instance, in situations such as preparing for an examination or a performance, as Ho (1999: 48) reminds us, 'memorising lines or already understood facts may be required to ensure success and is considered to be a deep approach'. Recent research on Hong Kong learners has sought to draw a clearer distinction between the rote learning *process* (mechanical learning without meaning) and repetition for 'deep memorizing' of *content*. Marton (1996: 81), for example, reports on a study exploring the conceptions of learning of 20 English teachers from China and Hong Kong. What emerges is a firm belief among these teachers that with each successive reading of a text will come a new understanding—'a notion of deeper understanding through repetition'. Dahlin and Watkins (2000: 66, 76) compared

German and Hong Kong Chinese learners' views on the role of repetition in memorization and found that the Hong Kong Chinese learners were aware of 'two possibilities inherent in repetition: creating a deep impression on the mind and discovering new meaning'. Furthermore, the emphasis on the '*attentive effort* necessary in repetition . . . is much more common among Hong Kong Chinese students than among the German students'.

Motivation for learning.   Recognizing the importance of exams and academic success for career enhancement in Hong Kong Chinese culture does not entail accepting a simplistic distinction between 'intrinsic' motivation (studying out of interest) and 'extrinsic' motivation (studying solely to achieve material rewards): 'Western ways of categorizing motivation . . . do not travel well, at least not to the Orient' (Watkins and Biggs 1996: 273). Kember (2000: 113) found that the Hong Kong students he interviewed wanted their courses 'to be both interesting and to provide an appropriate preparation for their future career . . . 40% of the interviewed students commented on both intrinsic and career motivation'.

Groups that work.   The picture of passive, non-participative Chinese learners and teacher-dominated, authoritarian classrooms is common (e.g. Scollon and Scollon 1994, Flowerdew and Miller 1995, Pierson 1996). However, as Cortazzi suggests, it may be that 'students are not passive but reflective . . . Chinese students value thoughtful questions which they ask after sound reflection . . . less thoughtful questions may be laughed at by other students' (1996: 191). Nor are teacher–student relationships as cold or 'authoritarian' as they at first appear. There is much interaction outside class with the teacher for 'students with problems in class expect the teacher to realize this and offer help after class, whereas Western teachers will assume that students with problems will ask for help' (Cortazzi 1996: 191). Flowerdew (1998: 325) cites a Hong Kong study (by Wong 1996) indicating that 'student-initiated collaborative learning strategies have been found to foster the adoption of a deep approach to learning and the use of high-level cognitive strategies'. Group solidarity can be an asset when it is harnessed for collaborative learning as studies on peer learning in Hong Kong by Winter (1996) and Tang (1996) illustrate. Learning in such groups goes beyond knowledge transfer to critical analysis and questioning: '[students] become aware of different perspectives on controversial issues, form judgements through critical thinking . . . rehearse, organize and clarify information in order to be able to communicate with the other members' (Tang 1996: 185). It seems that 'Chinese learning styles' are more subtle and complex than they appear to be in some (Western) misrepresentations of them.

Adult learning stages and learning styles

(Developmental) learning stages?

Is learning in adulthood qualitatively different from learning in childhood? While Piaget identified four discrete stages of cognitive development, Bruner saw these

as overlapping—each new stage supplements rather than supplants the preceding one. The culmination of these is the attainment of maturity and the development of explicit, rational ways of knowing. Claxton (1998) argues that Piagetian 'earlier' stages need not atrophy in adulthood; different modes of learning—through immersion, imagination, intuition or intellect—may continue to be deployed concurrently. Tennant (1997: 54) questions the view that certain 'developmental' stages are immutable and inevitable. He argues that such a position is based on a consensual view of human existence 'which posits a socially approved timetable for individual growth ... perhaps it is best to abandon the project of identifying universal age-related stages or phases of development'.[3]

A view of learning as something that continues across the whole life course entails a rejection of the notion that youth is the only phase for learning. Boulton-Lewis (1997) presents evidence that there is no serious decline in memory until people are well into their 60s. Premature assessments of who is a 'success' and who is a 'failure' are also inappropriate for, as Ball (1994: 6) says, while there may be faster and slower learners, there are few who are non-learners. Adults are as well-equipped as younger learners to continue learning. Is it perhaps more helpful to look at adult learning styles than at (age-related) learning stages?

Professional and experiential learning

Pogson and Tennant (2000: 25) cite studies of adult learning capacities that appear to indicate that while intelligence—as measured by IQ tests—may decline in old age: 'those components of intelligence based on learning from experience are maintained and even developed with age'. Much more attention is now being given to the importance of (work and life) experience in learning. As Kolb (1984: 56) puts it: 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'. Adults do not just acquire new information and add it to their existing 'knowledge bank account', they integrate the new information with what they already know—they construct meaning by relating it to their prior experience.

Eraut (1994) elaborates on the role of experiential learning in the development of professional knowledge. He questions the traditional idea that professional practice is based solely on propositional knowledge—the theories and concepts that are codified and taught in higher education institutions. Professional knowledge also includes process knowledge (know-how) and personal knowledge acquired through experience and social interaction. He points out that when professionals are asked to describe what they do, a list of processes results. Functional analyses of the kinds of knowledge needed in professional contexts—for instance, the interweaving of theory with clinical experience in medicine—may lead to a better understanding of what professionals actually do and suggest better ways in which these skills may be taught.

Research on expertise and the 'practical intelligence' adults demonstrate in non-professional contexts—from grocery shopping or gambling to taxi driving and factory work—has helped broaden our understanding of (non-academic) adult learning. What the studies (reported in Pogson and Tennant 2000: 25–29) reveal is the extent to which such learning is situated and 'domain specific'. For instance, grocery shoppers attained much higher scores when they were asked to

do maths calculations while shopping than they did when given identical pen-and-paper problems. Factory workers accustomed to a particular setting and to certain routines, incorporate 'the external environment into the problem-solving system . . . adopt effort saving as a higher-order cognitive strategy which informs the way they work and [use] ''practical thought'' to reformulate and redefine problems for ease of solution' (Pogson and Tennant 2000: 27). The challenge then is to harness the work and life experiences adult learners bring to class and link these up with tasks that enable them to deploy such experiential learning.

Jarvis's (1987: 16) model of the adult learning process also starts with (life) experiences. Every (social) situation is a potential learning experience—though that potential is not always realized—'even miseducative experiences may be regarded as learning experiences'. Some responses to experience will lead to non-reflective learning, while others will result in 'higher forms of learning' that call for application of or reflection on what has been learnt. In the past, learning was too narrowly concerned with academic knowledge alone. Jarvis (1998: 60) charts a shift of emphasis in recent years from the provision of *education*—planned, controlled and institutionalized learning—to a greater concern with lifelong *learning* and learner autonomy: 'Education is a public phenomenon and provides public recognition for learning' whereas learning can be more individualistic, and take place outside educational institutions at work or at a distance without a teacher present. As Ball (1994: 13) reminds us, nowadays, we all need to be equipped with a broad range of skills: 'technical' skills such as word-processing, 'personal' skills such as how to work effectively in teams, and 'conceptual' skills such as problem-solving. The old distinction between academic knowledge and vocational training is obsolete. To find (or to continue) in employment nowadays requires a constant updating of a person's 'cognitive capital' (Claxton 1996: 5).

Affective and other modes of (adult) learning

It is often assumed that scientific explanations and 'rational' ways of knowing are the highest modes of understanding. Piaget asserted that the 'formal operations' stage—abstract, intellectual ways of knowing—represents the pinnacle of adult learning. Riegel (1979: 40–50) comments that 'only under the most exceptional circumstances of logical argument and scholastic disputes would a person engage in such a form of thinking [Piaget's view of learning] . . . reflects the non-artistic and non-creative aspect in the intellectual history of Western man' (quoted in Squires 1995: 93). The traditional IQ hypothesis has been superseded by (Gardner's) idea of 'multiple intelligences': linguistic, mathematical, spatial, musical, physical as well as inter- and intra-personal skills. Claxton (1996: 53) also takes issue with the Piagetian idea that imagination should be a mode of learning only associated with childhood: 'Imagination and fantasy are treated as primitive forms of learning . . . emotions are still treated as interruptions to learning rather than resources for learning'. Lang (1998: 4) defines 'affect' as 'a significant dimension of the education process which is concerned with the feelings, beliefs, attitudes and emotions of students'. If adult learning is to be effective it needs to engage the imagination and the emotions as well as the intellect.[4] The importance of affective/imaginative learning is acknowledged in recent revisions to the admission criteria to Hong Kong tertiary institutions and

in Education Commission reports. Claxton reminds us that our contemporary culture of speed often (over)values knowledge expressed in the hyper-precise language of maths and science and neglects or devalues the more patient modes of mind. Learning also comes from 'emotional intelligence', imaginative insight or after a period of rumination when the 'metaphorical apple falls on the prepared mind' (1998: 67). Learning to *be* is as important as learning to *do*.

Learning tasks and effective adult learning styles

There is no single 'best way' for adults to learn. Knowles (1980) contends that effective adult learners are more self-directed and independent, they are able to draw on a reservoir of accumulated experience as a rich resource in learning, are aware of their learning needs and want to apply skills and knowledge to real-life problems and tasks (cited in Jarvis 1995: 90).[5] Knowles (1978) distinguishes between the 'pedagogue' who imparts knowledge and the 'andragogue' who facilitates (adult) learning through discussion, problem-solving and social interaction. Tasks and activities such as case studies, simulations and project work may be more appropriate for adult learners than traditional teaching methods. Groupwork tasks can enable adults to pool the wisdom, experience and expertise they bring to the classroom and, especially in the Hong Kong context, to obtain peer support. Brookfield's (1986) six principles for effective adult learning are: voluntary participation, mutual respect, collaborative spirit, action, reflection and self-direction (cited in Foley 2000: 48). Amongst the features of mature adult thinking styles identified by Rybash (1986) are a willingness to accept contradiction, an ability to synthesize contradictory thoughts and emotions into coherent wholes, a readiness to recognize the relative nature of knowledge and accept that there are multiple subjective perspectives on a situation, as well as a recognition that constant change is a fundamental given of modern life. Kegan (1994: 278) adds that a key factor in a mature learning style is the development of a critical consciousness—the ability to reflect on and challenge the socially constructed discourses in which we have been embedded and the inherited beliefs imbued in youth.

The cultivation of such a reflective attitude will depend crucially on how 'knowledge' is presented by a teacher[6] to learners: whether it is presented

> as if it were established to be universally and incontrovertibly true [or] conditionally, as if it were one position or viewpoint among several ... [for] when knowledge is presented as cut and dried universals, learners are implicitly led to engage learning strategies that simply record it ... when an element of doubt is introduced into the situation by the teacher's choice of language, one is invited to engage with it in a more questioning and intelligent fashion. (Claxton 1996: 51)

Readiness for learning

Effective adult learning, particularly the 'self-directed' kind, is closely linked to an adult's *readiness* to learn, which, in turn, seems to be linked to his or her

(changing) roles as worker, family member, etc. Merriam and Caffarella (1999: 277) report findings that show '83% of adult learners were engaged in learning activities because of some transition in their lives'. Adulthood is a time of growth and change, and learning may be affected by adverse changes—such as unemployment—or positive changes—such as the opportunities to return to study when child-care responsibilities end. Recurrent education can be transformative, a point of departure for a new lifestyle or a new sense of personal identity. 'Learning involves the reorganisation of experiences' (Merriam and Cafferella 1999: 254) but how an adult embarks on this new learning—wholeheartedly, half-heartedly, cynically, anxiously or reluctantly—will be a major factor in determining whether that learning will be successful or not. Claxton (1996: 11) argues that we need to attend more to preparedness for learning: 'Learners can be effectively blocked from taking up learning opportunities, or, if forced into them, will engage with them in a way that is designed to defend against the anticipated or imagined risk . . . a major goal for learning support then becomes the dissolution of these blocks'.

(Hong Kong) Chinese adults learning

When Hong Kong adult learners undertake post-secondary study—at universities in Hong Kong and overseas or on part-time continuing education programmes—they often encounter learning activities, modes of teaching and assessment that are very different from those they knew in school. To what extent do Hong Kong adult learners adapt their learning styles and adopt those of the 'effective' adult learner identified above? On the face of it, the adult learning styles listed by Brookfield, Knowles, etc., would not appear to be compatible with the traits of 'the Chinese Learner' as characterized earlier. However, as has been pointed out, it is not always clear in some of these studies whether the Chinese learners being written about are adults or children, men or women, PRC, Taiwanese or Hong Kong Chinese, etc.

The learning style preferences of Hong Kong adult Chinese learners

Contrary to stereotype, adult Hong Kong Chinese students 'report a stronger preference for high-level, meaning-based learning strategies and avoidance of rote-learning than do Western [Australian] students' (Watkins and Biggs 1996: 49). Tang and Biggs contend that in schools, Hong Kong children adopt certain learning styles for purely pragmatic reasons: the exams take a certain form and so students develop strategies they think are appropriate for dealing with the exams. It does not follow that these are their 'preferred' learning styles or that (older) Hong Kong Chinese learners are not capable of deploying other learning styles in other contexts: 'A learning approach must not be confused, as it often is, with the context-independent learning style' (1996: 165). In fact, when Littlewood (1996: 78) asked over 2000 Hong Kong adult learners about their preferred L2 learning styles, they 'exhibited an orientation to active and communicative modes of learning English . . . wished to have more opportunities to develop their fluency and attached more importance to it than to correct grammar and vocabulary'. Lam's (1997) study found a strong preference among (118) Hong Kong

undergraduate students for groupwork over individual learning tasks. It may be that at present, in Hong Kong schools, the competitive exam-oriented system does not encourage the deep approaches to learning advocated in recent Education Commission reports. As Zhang and Watkins (2001: 256) state, 'the ways in which students are assessed have a strong influence on the ways they approach their learning tasks. Therefore it is critical that teachers use assessment methods which tend to facilitate a deep approach to learning'.

The expectations of Hong Kong teachers

Adult learners may well not want to replicate the learning experiences they had in school. Indeed, as Claxton (1996: 47) points out: 'if adult learners make an analogy between a current learning context and their own (unhappy) experience of school [then] anachronistic assumptions may be activated'. However, students will not be able to develop new study skills and learning styles if their teachers believe them to be capable of only rote-learning (and related assessment): 'if the goal of education is deep learning, then educators in Hong Kong should adjust their teaching ... teaching students study skills that the ecology of the classroom does not support is simply a waste of time' (Ho 1999: 55–56). In the management of change though, there is a need for cultural sensitivity in dealing with Hong Kong teachers' preconceptions of what might constitute 'effective teaching'.

A study by Pratt (1999) revealed significant differences in the perceptions of Hong Kong Chinese teachers and Western expatriate teachers as to what constituted 'effective (university) teaching'. These Chinese teachers stressed the importance of foundational knowledge. They felt students needed to attain mastery of this as a first step in any discipline. The teacher was perceived to be the authoritative source whose job is to take students systematically through a set of tasks, step by step, varying the pace according to students' understanding; whereas the Western expatriate teachers working in Hong Kong tended to view their job as the elaboration, application or critique of foundational knowledge. By encouraging discussion, their aim was to facilitate independent learning so as to bring about a qualitative change in students' thinking. As mentioned earlier, the Hong Kong Chinese teachers saw themselves as having a pastoral role in guiding and mentoring students outside class. Though these Western teachers had more 'egalitarian' relationships with students, they appeared to be less understanding of them than their Chinese colleagues were, often characterizing students as lazy, spoon-fed or incapable of deep thinking. They had failed to 'see a link between student behaviour and social structures of formal schooling and family life in Hong Kong' (1999: 250). Flowerdew and Miller (1995) also report that the expatriate lecturers they interviewed in Hong Kong were frustrated by a perceived reluctance on the part of their students to express opinions in class. Smith (1999: 146) distinguishes between the reading strategies and research processes that arise from a post-Enlightenment critical tradition in the West and the very different traditions of reading and scholarship in 'Confucian cultures'. He contends that in the former, reading is an individualized act, entailing a certain irreverence towards texts and an approach to research that requires students 'to analyse, problematize and synthesize a critical response to a specific problem'. He contrasts this with the (Confucian) tradition of scholarship as

commentary and exegesis on canonical texts, with its emphasis on the conservation and reproduction of knowledge rather than critical challenge or individual interpretation: 'the aim of [such] reading was not to excavate a private significance in the text but to recite and compare the interpretation of acknowledged authorities' (1999: 150). Leaving aside the relative merits of either 'tradition', if this characterization is accurate, the key issue for the many Hong Kong adult learners undertaking, say, postgraduate study with overseas universities is how they can develop the ('Western') critical approach that may be required. Smith outlines a practical, systematic approach to the development of the necessary skills. He proposes equipping students with techniques to help them develop an attitude of 'reflective scepticism' towards texts—strategies such as attending to the definitions of key concepts, being alert to problematic assumptions or to ambiguous statements and asking whether conclusions are warranted. Students also need to be made aware of the discourse conventions— the 'rules, routines and ruses'—of their particular subject disciplines. Through a systematic programme of (guided) critical reading, it is possible for students to acquire the critico-creative skills needed: 'if critical thinking is a skill that derives from academic socialization (itself part of a broader cultural orientation), it follows that the supervisor can play a role in developing this skill' (1999: 147). In effecting curriculum changes, such as the move towards more problem-based learning in Hong Kong universities, it needs to be recognized that notions of 'effective teaching' may be rooted in cultural values and social norms; the perceptions Chinese teachers may have of their roles, responsibilities and relationships need to be acknowledged and handled sensitively during the change process.

Adopting new approaches to learning

Kember (2000: 110) mentions 90 action learning projects that were carried out at universities and colleges in Hong Kong. These included problem-based learning, group projects, peer teaching, simulations, reflective journals, multi-media packages, etc. The results of the projects lead him to conclude that 'the impression that Hong Kong students prefer passive learning and resist teaching innovation can have little or no foundation'. A key issue is the fitness for purpose of a particular learning style or approach. Study in the distance learning mode requires self-reliance, learner autonomy, tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity (Holmberg 1989)—a list of traits that would seem to be diametrically opposed to those of the 'Chinese learner' listed earlier in this paper. Yet Hills (1998: 159–163) found that over time, Hong Kong adult distance learners did adapt successfully to the demands of such independent study. Lee (1998: 283) reports on a project to promote greater autonomy in (L2) learning at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She lists five factors that are important in helping students to take charge of their own learning: the programme must be voluntary and sufficiently flexible to allow students to change either the content or the process of learning; students need to receive regular feedback and encouragement from a teacher, they must be able to work at their own pace and to decide on what, when and how much they will study. Peer support—to help foster collaboration, negotiation and interaction—is also important. Ho and Crookall

(1995) found that Hong Kong City University students who took part in a worldwide computer-mediated simulation developed some of the attitudes that are said to characterize autonomous learning. Traditional teacher–learner roles were redefined for the activity, students were no longer told what to do but had to plan, make decisions, debate, deal with people from other cultures, handle unpredictability, time management and conflict issues. In the event, they were able to rise to the challenge and take responsibility for their own learning. Liu and Littlewood's (1997) research leads them to conclude that Hong Kong students' reticence in class is 'less a question of modesty and face than one of competence [in English] and [lack of] confidence' because they are unaccustomed to participative modes of learning. However, students can be guided towards greater autonomy if teachers make explicit their expectations and perceptions, get students to brainstorm ideas and clarify concepts in small groups. Students also have to become familiar with the strategies needed for successful communication in English, such as turn-taking, asking for clarification, giving non-verbal feedback, etc. (1997: 378–382). An account of how literary texts were used to foster affective L2 learning among a group of Hong Kong Chinese adults is given by Kennedy (2002). Raddon and Sung (2002) report on the success of a work-based learning scheme in the Hong Kong hotel industry. The project reconciled the employees' desire for their 'training' to be accredited and certificated by an educational institution with the organization's need to ensure that certain job skills and competences were developed. This group of Hong Kong adult learners were able to utilize work experiences and skills in their learning and have them recognized and accredited.

Preparedness and support for learning

The evidence suggests that when Hong Kong students are given the chance to adopt more active methods in their post-compulsory education they can and do adapt their learning styles accordingly. However, there may be some initial difficulties outside the classroom as well as in. A Hong Kong study by Ip (1996) provides some useful insights into the coping strategies adopted by (247) mature students studying at Hong Kong City University when faced with time constraints, work pressure and family responsibility while studying. The learners' first broad strategy was to try to cope with their problems on their own, then to turn to spouses and family members for support and, only as a last resort, to seek help from professionals. They speculate that 'many Chinese like to keep their problems to themselves or within their families. To seek help from outsiders . . . [is] an admission of inadequacy . . . only a small number of mature students . . . approached teachers or counsellors for support' (1996: 38–42). They recommend that courses on coping strategies—time management, planning, problem-solving and critical thinking—be organized for adult learners and that there should be support networks for spouses and family members as well as better use of peer counselling. If teachers are to take a more active role in helping mature students, they will need to arrange informal gatherings to establish meaningful contacts (1996: 46).

Students accustomed to more teacher-centred classrooms will need to be given time and support to make the transition to new forms of learning: 'any teacher,

Western or Eastern, who plans to use methodologies which inevitably involve students' participation must make sure that the students are familiar with and accept such methodologies' (Cheng 2000: 444). The crucial element is building what Kegan (1994) calls a 'consciousness bridge' between the students' previous learning experiences and the new approaches.

Conclusion

Socio-cultural insights and an understanding of students' previous learning experiences can undoubtedly help L2 teachers to develop more culturally sensitive pedagogies. However, there is a danger of over-generalization for, as Scollon and Scollon (1995: 125) note, 'Cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do. In that sense, all communication is interpersonal communication and can never be intercultural communication.'

   Discussions of 'the Chinese Learner' are sometimes insufficiently sensitive to the age, gender or geographical location of the learners and beliefs about the influence of 'Confucian culture' on learning styles overstated: 'like Asian values . . . Confucian values have become a convenient explanation for any observed or actual behavioural trait' (Liu and Littlewood 1997: 374). As we have seen, 'Chinese learning styles' are far more subtle and complex than they are often made out to be. Common assumptions, such as the notion that memorization and understanding are mutually exclusive categories, may be in need of reappraisal.

   Adult Hong Kong learners are receptive to modes of learning quite different from those encountered in school. The successful adoption of such approaches will depends on factors such as language proficiency, the assessment system and teachers' expectations. However, the evidence suggests that when the context of learning changes and the modes of teaching and assessment require adult Hong Kong Chinese learners to adopt new learning styles they do so (provided they are given enough time to adjust).

   All too often, what comes through in the research literature on 'Chinese (L2) learning' is a deficit view; Chinese learners have to be weaned off 'inferior' or 'old-fashioned' modes of learning onto 'deeper' ways of understanding. Cortezzi cautions against such cultural imperialism: 'there is no reason to suppose that one culture of learning is superior to another . . . this needs to be kept in mind when teaching methodologies migrate around the world' (1996: 174). In fact, a better understanding of such 'Chinese learning styles' as 'deep memorization', collaborative group learning (Tang 1996, Kember 2000) and the pastoral role teachers play outside the classroom (Pratt 1999) could well benefit the Western learner. For instance, Ho (1999: 45) reports that Hong Kong students often attribute their academic success to effort rather than to ability and so they 'tend to find ways in which they might improve their performance, whereas Western students tend to attribute past performance to things they cannot do anything about'.[8] Claxton (1996: 13) observes that: 'learners possess different repertoires of learning strategies . . . [and] attempts to reduce learning styles to two, or four or sixteen predetermined categories are too crude to do justice to the qualitative differences between learners'. The same observation can be applied to the misconceptions, unexamined socio-cultural interpretations and deterministic accounts of Chinese learning styles that recur so frequently. It is time to start a

new paradigm and to go beyond the self-fulfilling prophecies and Confucian confusion that circumscribe notions of The Chinese Learner and Chinese Learning Styles.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. Of course, in mapping 'cultural traits', Hofstede acknowledged that only general tendencies and patterns could be identified and that within any particular society there will be a diverse range of beliefs and attitudes. Cultures are neither static nor isolated; societies are constantly changing and are increasingly influenced by global trends. However, the misperceptions that can arise from such socio-cultural characterizations—particularly when applied to 'Chinese learners'—is one of the main concerns of this paper.

2. For instance, a recent Education Commission document states that, in the Hong Kong education system, 'learning is still exam-driven and scant attention is paid to "learning to learn". School life is usually monotonous, student are not given comprehensive learning experiences with little room to think, explore and create' (Education Commission 2000: 4).

3. However, on the related issue of stages of cognitive development and their relationship with (adult) students' approaches to learning, Zhang and Watkins (2001: 239) found significant differences between 'cognitive-developmental patterns of American and Chinese participants' in their study.

4. I am not polarizing cognitive and affective learning here. In the case of L2 learning, for instance, improving fluency through affective learning tasks need not preclude grammatical accuracy.

5. Knowles has been criticized for focusing too narrowly on adult learners as autonomous individuals and neglecting the fact that we operate in a social context and so there are 'organisational and social impediments to adult learning' (Grace 1996, cited in Merriam and Caffarella 1999: 276). Some adults may be self-directed learners—as are some children—others are not. His third and fourth traits have been called into question for presenting too technical and reductionist a view of knowledge. Perhaps his framework is more of a prescription for what adult learning may be rather than a description of what it actually is.

6. The issue of how 'knowledge' was presented in 'Confucian' and 'Socratic' teaching traditions is considered later.

7. Hansen (1985) sheds further light on the (historical) differences between a 'Socratic' dialogue approach to teaching—through a process of systematic argument a teacher would lead a student to defend or interrogate a proposition—and the 'Confucian' teacher's practice of posing and answering his own rhetorical questions about classical texts. However, it is worth recalling that Confucius taught only adults not children. He 'expected his students to be motivated and active learners' (Palmer *et al.* 2001: 1). On the philosophical underpinnings— how Western notions of Truth arising from Reason and structured propositions differed from Chinese (moral) theories—see Hansen (1992).

8. Although the drawback is that, since both low achievers and high achievers attribute failure to lack of effort, the former may 'be pressured to increase their efforts when they are already working to their utmost [rather than being] taught in what ways and in what direction their effort may be more fruitfully deployed' (Ho 1999: 55).

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